

Centre of Global Studies – Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences – invites to a colloquium

Muslim religious discourse and the epistemological challenge of modernity

June 24, at the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague

The conference will take place online - ZOOM link will be sent to registered attendees.

Programme

14:30	Welcome
14:40–15:30	Keynote lecture and debate Lahouari Addi (IEP Lyon/Georgetown): <i>“Religion in itself and religion for itself”</i>
15:30–16:30	Philosophy and epistemic shifts Heydar Shadi (Hamburg): <i>“Abdolkarim Soroush’s epistemological turn”</i> Zora Hesová (Prague): <i>“Teleological and modern epistemic ‘grand schemes of things’ between al-Ghazali and Soroush”</i>
16:30–16:45	Break
16:45–18:00	Epistemic shift and resistances: Religious discourse Gökhan Bacik (Olomouc): <i>“Sunni Orthodoxy and resistance to modernity in Turkey”</i> Meysam Badamchi (Leiden): <i>“Between Truth and Democracy: Mostafa Malekian’s Theory of Rationality and Spirituality”</i> Joseph Kaminski (Sarajevo): <i>“Islam, liberalism and ontology”</i>
18:00–19:00	Open debate

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For **registration**: please write to hesova@flu.cas.cz and state your academic or other affiliation.

The colloquium’s argument:

The workshop seeks to discuss the epistemic condition in modernity in regard to contemporary Muslim thought. As its point of departure it takes a comprehensive thesis by Lahouari Addi that appeared recently in a book *“Crises of the Muslim religious discourse. The necessity to pass from Platon to Kant”* (Louvain 2019). L. Addi joins both the debates about both the crisis of modern Muslim society in facing modernity (Abdelwahab Meddeb) and texts by and about authors writing in modern hermeneutical and critical perspectives about Islam and philosophy into a larger argument about the epistemic predicament of modernity and the lag of Muslim religious discourse.

The argument of the “Crisis of the Muslim religious discourse” could be preliminarily summarised as follows:

There is a growing gap between the urbanised and individualised modern way of life and the assumptions of the religious discourse in Muslim cultures that partly explains a certain unease or even crisis facing modernity of contemporary Muslim societies. The Muslim religious discourse is namely a) constructed upon a medieval metaphysics that b) does hinder adaptation to the modern world, despite c) attempts to overcome both the epistemic closure and the cultural discrepancy.

The argument is not about Islam as a religion and as about Muslim's relation to the sacred text, but about the *religious discourse* produced by religious institutions and Muslim states that informs the culture underlying contemporary religious practice. The argument is that this religious discourse has a metaphysical core that has not epistemically adapted to modernisation. It namely remains based both on a sacred text and on metaphysical, cosmological and anthropological assumptions of Late Antiquity, in ways that are often unconscious to those who interpret the Text with Greek metaphysical notions.

- a) In Muslim discourse, Greek essentialist thought continues to inform the interpretation of religion to this day. Muslim theology was in fact built upon Platonic dualism and Aristotelian naturalism that were merged in a neo-Platonic gnostic cosmology in the moment Muslim thinkers were making sense of the Qur'anic message from the 8th century onwards. It remains expressed in Greek notions once Seldjuk theological orthodoxy was fixated against philosophical inquiry at the end of the Islamic Golden age. Christianity, due to the Thomist focus on Aristotelian naturalism, had to abandon the pre-modern metaphysical framework in the wake of modern scientific discoveries by Galileo and Newton who have invalidated it, and developed a rich array of theological and philosophical responses to modernity, operating within the "frame of immanence". Muslim orthodoxy continued, on the other hand, to build upon a dualist philosophical theology where reason was conceived as a natural (and divine) principle. In consequence, Muslim modernists could integrate scientific and technological progress within the deist system, thus avoiding the confrontation with modern epistemic challenges of the philosophy of the subject and positivism in social sciences and also rejecting a "cultural secularisation".
- b) The consequences of the Muslim world attachment to the medieval episteme abound in intellectual, moral and political spheres. In the religious discourse, higher reality attached to the other world makes it difficult to endow worldly subjects with moral autonomy and agency while rationality and morality remain naturalised and so easily made into matters of public enforcement. The unwillingness to locate knowledge within the subject's capacity precludes the differentiation of religious discourse from "religion" and prohibits hermeneutical and historical inquiry into religious texts. In the heteronomous system of the Muslim religious discourse, man is the object of laws and not the subject of morality and a creator of society. Hence moral and social norms continue to be seen as natural (divine) laws; they do not require assent by autonomous subjects but rather submission and interiorisation and remain objects of public (political) enforcement. Medieval episteme so favours the elaboration of utopic political projects based on a simple vision of social order and in its explicit (Islamist) elaboration may stand in contradiction with liberal democratic aspirations. There is a growing tension between the medieval epistemic assumptions of religious discourse and such modern aspirations as modern, urbanised and individualised ways of life in a largely disenchanted world favours, or in fact demands, adaptive life strategies, autonomous morality and individualised faith – reflected even in contemporary Muslim fundamentalism.
- c) Modern philosophical thought has, after philosophical revolutions by Descartes, Kant etc., and cultural criticism by Nietzsche etc., introduced a radical breach with the medieval episteme based on a Platonic essentialism and Aristotelian naturalism. Modern thought has put the knowing subject into the centre, made it into an autonomous source of moral deliberation and partaker of a social contract. There were many attempts at adapting Muslim religious thought to modern debates – some are debated in the book. The important shift from a Platonic to the Kantian paradigm has allowed to differentiate – in various forms suggested e.g., by M. Taha, M. Shahrour or N. Boukrouh – between the sacred text and its interpretation, between religion and religious discourse etc. The argument is that it is possible to modernise (secularise) the religious discourse while retaining religious spirit or spirituality. Modern religiosity is individualised – taken from the competence of institutions sanctioned by state and monopolistic clergy and endowed to the competence of the subject. Relations between people are regulated by law rather than a heteronomous morality, which depoliticises religion.

Lahouari Addi's argument – whose complexity and historical detail cannot be rendered in this summary – opens a wide range of questions concerning:

- the importance of historically contextualised philosophical thought for contemporary religious discourse (how does philosophy matter in religious thought?)
- the definition and cultural influence of “religious discourse” (is there a hegemonic “religious discourse” or discourses that defines general religiosity? What are its cultural boundaries and political dimensions?)
- the reality and consequence of the medieval-to-modern epistemic turn (is the “immanent frame” necessary for (liberal) modernity?)
- Muslim modernist responses to the epistemic gap (what are the main arguments of Muslim thinkers who adopt modern epistemic positions? Is there a core epistemic argument?)
- the capacity of Muslim traditionalists to incorporate modern perspectives (have traditionalists really failed to respond to modern challenge?; what is the nature of the traditionalist hegemony?)
- relation between modernist thought and the “Muslim discourse” (does the critical perspective have influence on the hegemonic discourse? Are there shifts within the traditionalist position?)
- modern conception of religion in Muslim thought? (Do Muslim modernist share outlooks on religion/spirituality in a modern context?)

The colloquium will discuss some of these questions on the basis of recent texts focussing on related issues. The aim is to bring the authors together and let them present their perspectives. After the introduction of the critical perspective by Lahouari Addi, the second part will concentrate on the religious philosophy of Abdolkarim Soroush – as an example of an attempt to epistemic reform contemporary Islamic reform discourse; and the third will concentrate on the production of religious discourse: traditionalist, modernist and pluralist respectively. The colloquium will end with an open debate.

Participants:

Lahouari Addi (Lyon, Georgetown) will present arguments from his book „*La crise du discours religieux musulman. Le nécessaire passage de Platon a Kant*” (Louvain 2019) ahead of the expected translation of his book to appear with Routledge

Heydar Shadi (Hamburg), has (among others) analysed the epistemological turn in Soroush's reform project in “*The Philosophy of Religion in Post-Revolutionary Iran*” (Routledge 2018)

Zora Hesová (Prague) is about to publish a commented selection of translations of key texts by Abdolkarim Soroush (Prague 2021) and will analyse the question of continuity or discontinuity between Soroush and al-Ghazali's in breaking out of the “epistemic closure”.

Meysam Badamchi (Leiden) has studied modernist theological and traditional philosophical perspectives on political liberalism, including analysis Mostafa Malekian's theory for spirituality that places religion within the boundaries of enlightenment, in *Post-Islamist Political Theory. Iranian Intellectuals and Political Liberalism in Dialogue* (Springer 2017).

Gökhan Bacik (Olomouc) has recently published a study on the metaphysical notion of nature in mainstream and revivalist religious discourse as an example of the complex encounter of religion with modernity in contemporary Turkey, “*Islam and Muslim Resistance to Modernity in Turkey*” (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020).

Joseph J. Kaminski (Sarajevo) examines the differing fundamental philosophical categories that constitute "Islam" and "Liberalism" in a recent publication “*Islam, Liberalism, and Ontology: A Critical Re-evaluation*” (Routledge 2021)